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Vietminh Step Held Threat to Thailand

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A singular startling development has taken place in recent weeks behind the Bamboo Curtain of the 17th parallel in Communist-controlled North Vietnam.

It has received little or no publicity in the West, although Radio Hanoi, the voice of Ho Chi Minh's regime in the north, has afforded it considerable fanfare.

This development springs from the formation of an "Autonomous Thai-Meo Zone" in the northwestern sector of the Vietminh territory. Significantly, its establishment is in line with the establishment by Communist China of an "Autonomous Thai People's State" in Yunnan province in February of 1953.

Between these two widely spaced events was the emergence at Peking last year, only a few days after the Geneva conference, of Thailand's former Premier Pridi Phanomyang. Mr. Pridi, on that occasion, called openly for the "overthrow" of the present, pro-Western government in Thailand today.

Radio Hanoi's first inkling of the new Thai-Meo zone was disclosed in a broadcast tailored for internal Vietnam consumption.

On that same day, however, the Vietnam News Agency, a Communist organization, transmitted an English-language morsecast dispatch throughout Southeast Asia which drew attention to the plight of some 60,000 Vietnamese refugees who live in Thailand's northeastern provinces. The dispatch also declared Ho Chi Minh's willingness to negotiate the issue.

The presence of these refugees has long been a source of concern to Bangkok. These refugees fled Indochina at the start of the bitter French-Vietminh struggle for the rice-rich country.

Potential Trouble Spot

To enliven matters, most of them were solidly pro-Ho and anti-French to a man. They settled in districts which formed a former Pridi political stronghold—an area which faces north where the Communist Chinese have their "Autonomous Thai State" and east, where the newly formed "Autonomous Thai-Meo Zone" exists today.

Bangkok has long viewed the north as a source of potential, long-range trouble. The east must be added now.

Varicous Radio Hanoi broadcasts and VNA dispatches dovetail to provide this interesting picture on how the Communists employed "democratic methods" in forming the new autonomous area.

After the French military and political defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May of last year, followed by the summer conference at Geneva and the partitioning of Vietnam, a preparatory committee of 34 persons representing 16 districts in northwest Vietnam—bordering on Laos and pointed in the direction of Thailand—appealed to Ho Chi Minh's council of ministers to establish an autonomous state.

'Autonomous Zone' Decree

The Thai race is liberally sprinkled through this area and has become more numerous as it moves across Laos and southward into Thailand proper. The

Meo are a small mountain people who largely inhabit Laos.

In December, 1954, Ho's council adopted a resolution to establish an autonomous zone of Thai and Meo peoples.

The fourth session of the National Assembly, held in March of this year, rubber-stamped this "extremely important resolution." The Assembly's decision, needless to add perhaps, as in the case of all Fascist and Communist groups, was "unanimous."

On April 29, while the Bandung Conference listened to Communist China's Premier Chou En-lai soothe Thailand and present the Communist world's latest tactical shift, this time to a theme of peace and negotiation, Ho Chi Minh issued decree No. 230-SL which formally set up the new autonomous area.

Two Key Features

The annex to the decree, which outlined the authority of the new zone, contained two pointed features: the Thai-Meo zone would have the authority to organize its own militia, including, of all things, guerrillas; and also the right to use the Thai language and script in its administrative territory.

This was underscored later by Vietminh leaders in last month's commemoration of the Communist victory at Dien Bien Phu and also the founding of the "Autonomous Thai-Meo Zone."

But crossing wires somewhere along the disciplined line, Ho Chi Minh sent a message to the new region in which he openly declared that his regime had de-

the cover name for Vietnam's Communist Party.

Thus, he admitted that the whole setup was put in motion by himself.

Urged to Build Army

And Gen. Vo Ngyuen Giap, the commander in chief of the Communist forces in Vietnam, advised the people in a separate message to "push forward in the Thai-Meo zone with the building of a local army, guerrilla force, and militia in order to protect the autonomous area, protect its frontiers, smash all enemy-sabotaging maneuvers, and contribute a worthy part to the struggle for peace, unity, independence, and the democracy of all our people."

On this note, the state-controlled press in North Vietnam launched an editorial campaign to "warmly welcome" the new autonomous region.